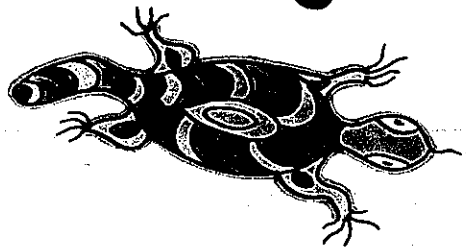
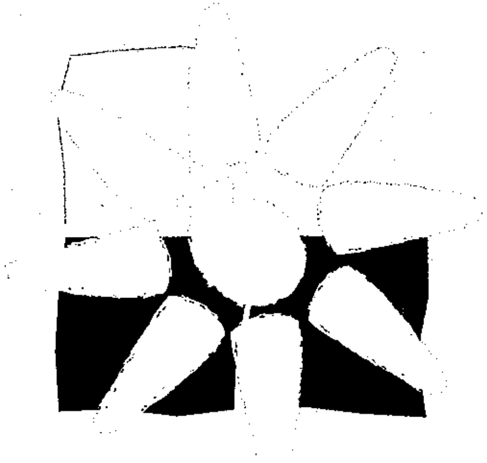
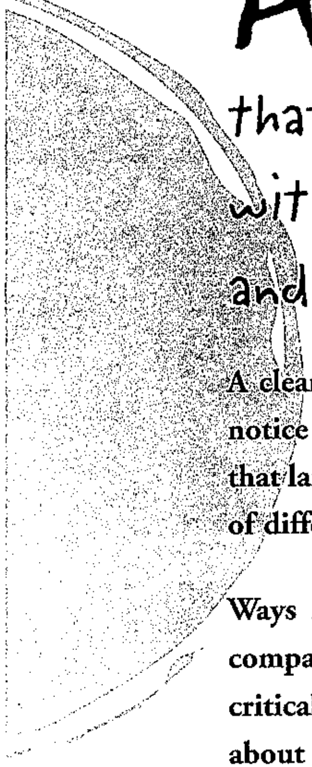
Language





Language Awareness

A key outcome of two-way bidialectal education is that non-standard dialect speakers will be equipped with the capacity to switch from one code to another and back again: that they will learn to code-switch.

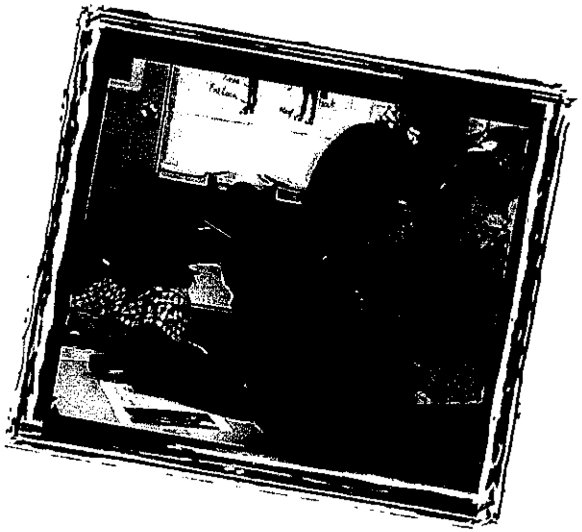


A clear prerequisite to code-switching is being able to separate one dialect from another – the capacity to notice the difference. Discussions about linguistic differences, however, need to be tempered by sensitivity to the fact that language is more than a clinical string of words. It's a window to a person's ideas, identity and values, so discussions of difference need to be accompanied by discussions about the broader topics of culture, choice and context.

Ways in which teachers might address cultural and linguistic differences with their students are suggested in the companion volume to this book, *Deadly Ideas* (Cahill, 2000). Another recommended resource for development of critical language awareness is the *Critical Language Awareness Series* edited by Hilary Janks (1993). Publication details about these resources are provided on page 84.

Jeanette

My students and I were having afternoon tea at my house. We were sitting outside around the table. They started talking Aboriginal English. To clarify a comment, I said, "What did you say?" and they responded with "We not in school now Miss Jeanette. We talk our language. You try understand us".



Peta

I'm amazed at how often teachers tell me their kids don't speak Aboriginal English until they tape it and listen.

Trish

Be careful when we use the term "biadialectal education" in classrooms where more than two dialects may be evident. This term could be taken to imply that Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English are "THE" dialects and that all the others are not valued.

Rosemary

The students at a few of the schools involved in the *Deadly Ways to Learn* project were bilingual as well as bidialectal; their first language was the Indigenous language of their people and they were learning two dialects of English – Standard Australian English from teachers and Aboriginal English from peers. The kids were constantly switching from one code to another, usually from their Indigenous language into Aboriginal English and back again. The teachers are often the only Standard Australian English speakers in the community, so reasons for using Standard Australian English sometimes have to be contrived. I saw one such situation at a remote community school. One of the kids was asked to role-play being a bird ("Tweet, Tweet") which only understood "bird talk". To find out about "Tweet, Tweet", the rest of the class had to pose questions in Standard Australian English (this dialect was stipulated) so the teacher could act as interpreter and relay the questions to the bird in "bird talk". The session was a lot of fun and the kids did really well with Standard Australian English questions, etc., but the point of this story is what happened later that day...

We all went out bush, and the kids sat together in the back of the school vehicle. They were talking mainly in their Indigenous language until one of the kids started reliving parts of the "Tweet, Tweet" session from earlier in the day. The kids instantly switched to Standard Australian English, presumably because the lesson had been in that dialect. In this case, the code selection was more dependent on the **content** of the exchange than it was on the **audience.**

Tanya

A few years ago, an eight-year-old girl in my class was telling a story and she said something about "them womans". I automatically corrected her, saying, "It's not 'them womans' – it's 'those women' ". She responded with, "Well, thas your way of sayin it, 'womans' is our way". At the time I thought she was speaking a poorer form of English and needed to be shown how to speak "correctly". Now I actually use her approach to highlight the differences between the dialects and to show that they are two alternative codes that different people use in different situations.

Caroline

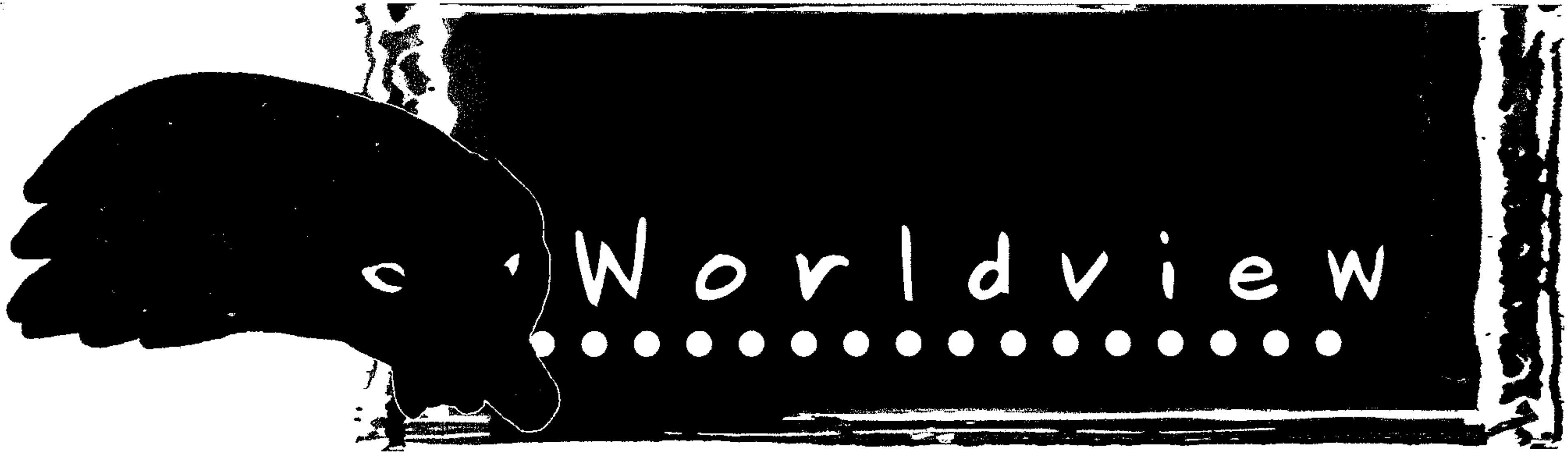
The following yarn shows that ultimate control remains with the language user. The man described here chooses when, where and for whom he will switch to suit his own purposes. This is what empowerment through language is all about...

One old man in the community who spoke very little English would only ever speak to me in one-word phrases, usually barking commands. I used to go out bush a lot with him and his wife. I was always told by the principal to not let him talk me into taking the car off the main track too much. This old man would always point and tell me in language to go off the track and every time I would because he would get louder and louder, yelling at me in language. Even when he came to my house he would talk to me in language. One day when he was at my house (after knowing him for three years) for yet another cup of tea, he turned to me and said, "Hey, you got any biscuits?" I just about fell over!

Rosemary

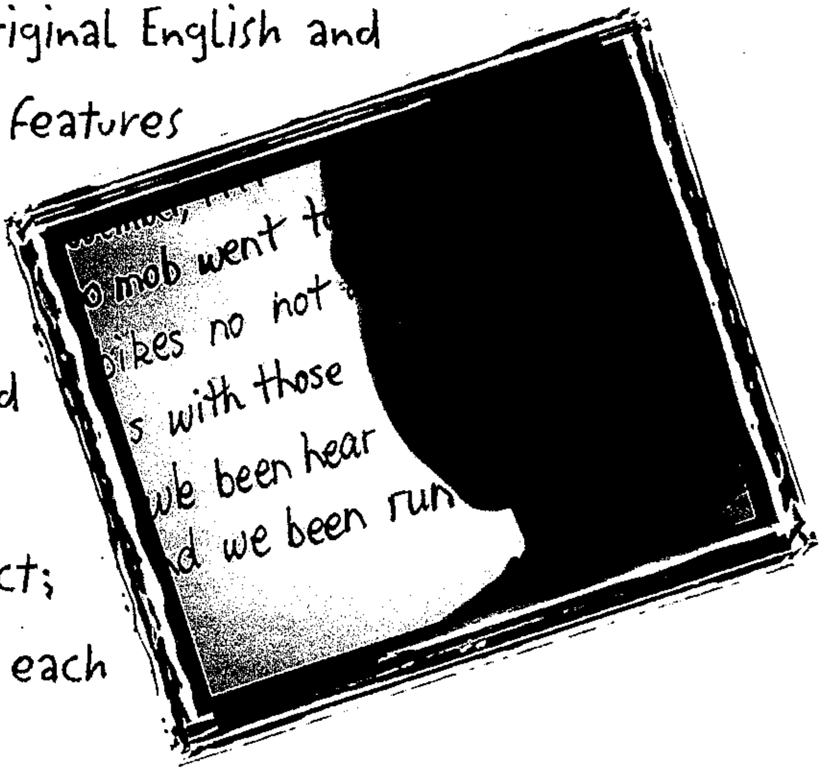
*The following yarn shows how awareness of language can guard against being seduced by omissions or by "little words" that **may seem** innocuous enough, but which have the potential to block out a vast range of possibilities.*

I was listening to talk-back radio during the republic debate in 1999. Every caller and the announcer used the pronoun "he" to refer to the prospective President – it didn't occur to anyone that the President could be a "she". This illustrates how language perpetuates worldview and assumptions, and how it's the "little words" that give us away when it comes to revealing those assumptions. The same is true for the words people use to talk about Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English. For as long as people refer to Standard Australian English as "writing it **properly**" or "his **best** talk" or "**correcting** it", they are saying that Aboriginal English is an inferior dialect. Once someone genuinely believes that Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English share *parity of esteem*, that person finds it virtually impossible to refer to the standard dialect with any implication of superiority. It becomes as discordant as referring to one's father as "she".



Worldview

The first differences people notice between Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English tend to be the surface features — the sounds, rhythms and words that are added or deleted. These features are important, but are only part of the story. More pervasive and less easily understood differences relate to the deeper cultural meanings that underpin each dialect; the latent worldview, assumptions and values that each dialect represents and draws upon.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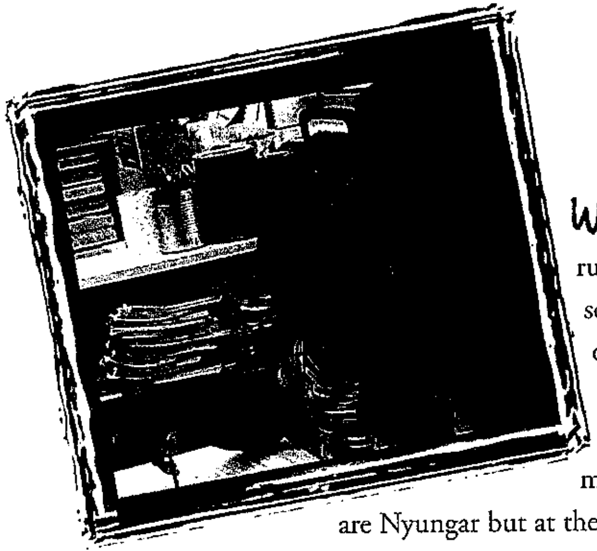
Tanya



We take a run across the school oval on most mornings. Most of my students are Nyungar but at the moment I have two Martu sisters from Newman (in WA's Pilbara region) attending. One morning most of the students had reached the other side of the oval and were on their way back. One of the Martu girls stopped me with a whisper, "Look! Miss...". There in the long grass on the far side of the oval, completely hidden from all our eyes, was a small bungarra (goanna) – about 60cm long. I would never have seen it but, for this girl, bungarra is a food source – even a delicacy perhaps – and she saw it clear as day. I'd like to know how much the children see that we miss.

Rosemary

During a school visit, I was at the back of a Year 4 classroom trying to make myself inconspicuous when I started looking at some cards that the students had been asked to make for "someone special in your life". One by one, I read the cards.

"Dear mom and dad...I hope I will pay back one day all the things you have done for me... Jenny."

"My Grandma spoils me to make me happy when I am sad and mostly for no reason. She does not expect anything in return...by Lesley."

"Each night, my dad helps me with my homework...from Alan."

"My dad is good because he gives me money and helps me to do stuff when I'm at his house...Neil."

...and so it went on.

Then I read the card made by one of three Aboriginal children in the class. He'd written, "Our mum is special because she loves all of us and she gets us new shoes. From Dale."

The contrasting orientations were very marked, but had gone unnoticed by the teachers who had not been alert to the differences in worldview held by the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in this class. While all the cards written by non-Aboriginal children revolved around "me" and "mine", Dale's card was based on "us" and "ours".

Sue

My parents came from Melbourne to visit me at Wulungarra (about three hours' drive south of Fitzroy Crossing in WA's Kimberley region). I took them a back way on a bush track I'd travelled only once or twice. I took the wrong turn and ended up at a deserted community, not once, but three times! My mother, unaccustomed to bush travel, was getting a bit worried and eventually said, in exasperation, "Why don't they put up some signs?"

I had to explain, "There are lots of signs – I just can't read them. See that tree? That's a sign. And that rock? That's another, but I haven't learned how to read them yet".

I hadn't learned how to read the signs that were there for all to see.

Alan

One of the most significant moments for me (during the *Deadly Ways to Learn* project) was when we were working on developing our play to illustrate the topic of communication breakdown. There were three Wadjellas (white fellas) and two AIEWs (Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers) working on the play and Glenys and Louella (Aboriginal Project Officers) joined us. We started to discuss how Wadjellas and Nyungars raised their kids. One of the Wadjellas made the point that it seemed that Nyungar parents let their kids run around during the evening without any supervision. Glenys explained how Nyungars had a different worldview – how Nyungar parents saw their kids and their relationship with them differently. She referred to "little mans" and "little womans". She also explained how supervision by Nyungars was different – it wasn't just mum and dad who would be looking after the kids during the evening, but aunts and uncles as well.

I found it enormously difficult to take on board the Nyungar worldview. One of our group found this process so difficult that frustration brought her to tears. I realised during this session how difficult it is to understand, accept and make my own certain aspects of the worldview of another culture.

Wadjella Worldview Rules! Like heck! – it simply dominates the interior spaces between my ears.

Donna

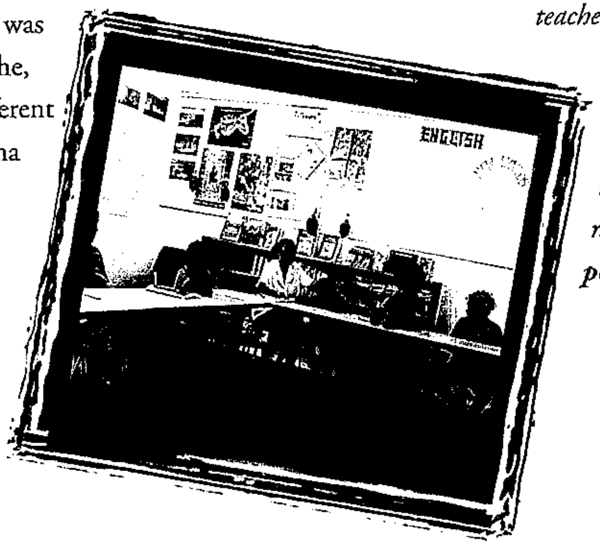
A colleague was conducting some research on "viewing" with a year 4 boy. She said, "Have a look at this photo and tell me what is in it." The picture was of a service station with a car fuelling up. After a short while the boy responded, "This was taken a long time ago, Miss. The petrol is only 63 cents".

Respecting another worldview does not mean having to adopt it. Learning about another way does not mean having to abandon your own way. It just means accepting that there are other ways, and that your way might not suit other people. Of course there will be times when you find out about another way that you think is pretty good and that you'd ***like*** *to adopt, but that's up to you. You don't have to do that to be two-way and to be respectful of another view. It's like having a preference for certain styles of dress – you might find another person's style interesting, but not something you want to copy.*

Kate

I was reading a book that exposes, in story form, some of the grandies Australia has in the animal/insect/spider world to my class of year 3/4/5s. We'd been doing lots on predicting "what's coming next?" so when we came to the picture with a little boy sitting on one of those old Australian thunder boxes, reading a book, oblivious to the red-back spider climbing up the box, I asked "What's going to happen next?". Me, the country girl who grew up to the twangy strains of "There was a red-back on the toilet seat, when I was there last night and I didn't see it in the dark, but boy I felt his bite..." can see now that I expected the kids to say something about the spider biting the boy's exposed bottom. The little fellow who'd requested the story was right up front and he, however, had a different idea: "Him be gonna do shit, Miss!"

I was brought back to a heightened state of awareness about the fact that, despite all my years of teaching ESL and trying to scaffold experiences and be aware of contexts, there are going to be times when my view of the world and my assumptions creep in...



See also the yarns about swearing on page 24. This is a recurring point of contention for teachers and Aboriginal personnel involved in this project. The consensus seems to be that it's probably best to point out to kids that some people find swearing offensive, and that every time they swear within earshot of those people, they run the risk of offending them.

A further factor with respect to understanding cultural and linguistic differences among groups is that there are also many similarities. The key is for teachers to continuously operate a mental "radar", ever ready to detect assumptions and to question them. It requires that teachers assume neither difference nor sameness – rather, that they remain alert to the ***possibility of difference*** *in all things.*

Pragmatics

Pragmatics relates to the "manners" and "habits" of usage that people apply as part of a language or dialect. It refers to things like turn-taking in a conversation, the way you're expected to go about getting information from others, the way it's okay (or not) to withhold information, the way ideas are organised, whether you talk in generalisations or about the particular, and so on.

The differences that occur between dialects at this level of language are less tangible than the words, sounds or grammar. They are important cultural markers, and are the source of many instances of cross-cultural miscommunication.

Rosemary

We lived outside Australia when our children were tiny, so the photos we had with us of family and friends were very precious. I often sat the kids on my knee to look at the photos and say things like, "Do you remember this one? Who's this at the back? And who's that holding you? What about that one with the red jacket?" Most of the time I'd answer these questions for them because they were either too young to talk or didn't know the answer anyway. Through this banter, my kids learned to recognise various family and friends. They also learned how to participate in that sort of questioning. They learned that I was asking mainly as an invitation for them to "display" what they knew. I knew the answer, and wanted to know if they knew.

I've talked about this with Aboriginal friends and they tell me that an Aboriginal person doing the same sort of thing is more likely to say things like, "Look 'ere at this photo. That one at the back is Aun'y Leslie and that one holdin' ya, e Uncle Nev, and look dere...dat one with the red jacket on, e be your ol' nan!".

Note the differences. The phonological differences are easy to pick, but other important differences exist. Among them is the fact that I asked lots of "display questions" (as teachers tend to do in the classroom) while Aboriginal people are more inclined to simply tell the kids who's who. Consider this from the perspective of how well prepared different groups of children may be for "display questions" when they encounter them at school.

Rosemary

Louella told me about giving a friend a lift to the doctor. Louella headed off towards the doctor she'd taken the friend to two weeks earlier and was told, "Nah, nah...not that way...the one in Wanneroo Road".

Louella was surprised. Just two weeks ago, the friend had started up with a new doctor. Louella said, "I thought you was going to Dr Smith."

"Nah, bugger 'im," came the reply, "... 'e don' understand what I'm sayin' to 'im! Stupid doctor."

This constant changing of doctors results from communication problems between non-Aboriginal doctors and their Aboriginal patients. It erodes continuity of treatment and inevitably contributes to poor health situations among Aboriginal peoples. This situation is also evident in other services including housing, banking, justice, transport, and education.

Rosemary

The year 10 English teacher was teaching the features of procedural texts and had asked her students to apply those features in a set of instructions about how to do or make something they knew quite a lot about. One of the boys wrote instructions for how to make a bow and arrow. After he'd read it to the class the teacher asked, "What do you use your bow and arrow for?"
The boy replied, "No.... don't have one... I used to, ... before,...but not now".
Another boy in the class wrote about how to catch a wild horse. His instructions covered trapping the horse through to breaking it in. At the end, the teacher asked, "What do you with it then?" The boy replied, "Ride it".
In each case, the teacher's intention had been to make a generalised enquiry, but the boys had responded to the particular and the immediate. This illustrates the contrast between decontextualised and contextualised use of language. Speakers of Standard Australian English tend to do the former, and speakers of Aboriginal English tend to do the latter.

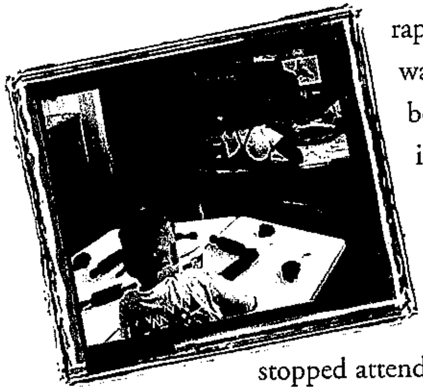
Conductive hearing loss due to middle ear infection (Otitis Media) is a major problem across Australia, and is particularly prevalent among Aboriginal students. The Do You Hear What I Hear? *CD package (Education Department of Western Australia, 1998) explains the condition and outlines measures that can be carried out at school to reduce the debilitating effects of this infection. Inclusion of the following yarn should not be taken to imply that the magnitude of conductive hearing loss can be underestimated. Rather, the yarn has been included to alert teachers to the difference between an unwillingness to listen and an inability to hear.*

Rosemary

A teacher working in a country town outlined to me the rationale behind a perceptual-motor program she had designed for her class. "It's really effective...it helps with listening, following sequences and patterns...it's especially good for the Aboriginal kids – they have very poor listening skills."
It hadn't occurred to her that the kids might be perfectly capable of listening, but are not used to having to tune-in to and follow the commands of one controlling adult. Programs of this sort may be effective, not so much because they teach kids to ***listen,*** but because they make explicit for kids the expectation that they listen ***to the teacher*** and that they act upon what the teacher tells them ***straight away.***

Patsy

When I was working at an all-Aboriginal post-compulsory college in Hedland, a new teacher joined our staff. She quickly struck-up excellent rapport with the students, but about three weeks into term, she came to me, most upset. She said, "I don't know what's gone wrong! We got on so well till now – but suddenly they think it's okay to just tread all over me. They put their arms around me and tell me what to do. There's no asking politely – no 'thank you' or 'please' – I don't know what's happened". I explained that this was really a sign that the students felt safe and comfortable around her. They felt the rapport they had with her was so good that they could be themselves. This was an ideal learning environment. To reprimand them would have broken the trust that had evolved and students would probably have stopped attending her class. As it turned out, that class did extremely well and both teacher and students were rewarded with top results.



Caroline

A teacher was asked to work with a group of kids for a day – oral games, language exploring type activities – to build up a bit of a rapport with this group, as she was going to be working intensively with the kids in the future. At the end of the day, she said that it was good but that the kids were a bit too "familiar" with her. This was the whole idea!!

Rosemary

At a high school in WA's South-West, we met an Aboriginal teacher who told us about some of the difficulties he'd experienced during teaching practice when "praising up" students. The class was mainly non-Aboriginal and, while he felt he was giving out a lot of praise, neither the students nor the non-Aboriginal supervising teacher seemed to recognise it for what it was. This presented him with a bit of a dilemma: he was reluctant to change the way he gave out praise (because it seemed like a betrayal of Aboriginal ways) but he wanted to reach his students and get a good mark for his teaching practice and to become a qualified teacher. The problem eventually resolved itself through extensive contact – after a while, the kids got to know him, they began to understand his style of giving praise, and everyone learned to respect and value other ways of doing things.

Rosemary and Louella

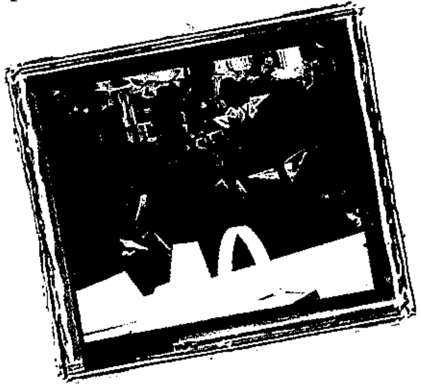
Louella:

I arrived at King Edward Hospital to welcome my newborn niece Eleanor Elsie into the world. My first words upon seeing her were, "Now don't you go thinkin I'm gonna be babysittin you when you get outta herea".

Rosemary:

Louella told me this one day as we were driving somewhere. We both had a laugh about it and then I said, "You know, as a non-Aboriginal person, if I'd gone to visit a newborn niece, I'd be more likely to say something like 'Oh, look at you, aren't you a beautiful little thing!'"

Two things came to light through this experience. First, that a lot of Aboriginal children experience light-hearted teasing and humour from the moment of birth so they learn to expect that kind of interaction and understand their role in it. It must be a bit of a shock when they get to school and find out that it's not an okay way to carry on with the teachers. Second, that my kids have heard rhetorical questions from the moment they were born so when they got to school, they understood their role in that type of interaction and were more likely to react in ways that their teachers expected and condoned.



Rosalind

An Aboriginal health worker I know told me the following story. When Aboriginal people turn up at health clinics, they are asked a whole heap of questions, which they dutifully answer as best they can. As we all know, they will often be referred on to another doctor or specialist who asks the same questions. When the questions come a second time, the Aboriginal people start to think, "The answers I gave last time must've been wrong" – their experience of white fella questions in other contexts has taught them this – so, second time around, they give slightly different answers. As the same questions are asked a third or fourth time by a third or fourth nurse or doctor or medical receptionist, the answers continue to change. Eventually, the inevitable fall-back strategy of saying "yes" to everything may be used.

You can just see it happening... "Does this hurt?" – "Yes". "Is it feeling any better?" – "Yes" "Are you sure you understand the risks involved in this procedure?" – "Yes".

Lovella

Turn-taking: soo ard! I know that's the rule, Wadjella ways, but I'm not used to it so I always have to remind myself "Wait, wait your turn...don't say nothin', don't say nothin' ".

Christine

At the university where I teach I was having difficulty trying to explain to an Aboriginal student sitting at the computer how to access something he wanted. I was very frustrated. I felt like saying, "Get off...I'll do it", but just at that moment, the Aboriginal coordinator walked past so, as an experiment, I asked her to help him. She stood behind the student and instructed him with words like "go up there", "scrub that", "get the next bit". I was amazed at how the student flew through the instructions and got where he wanted to be in no time. He automatically knew what "scrub that" and "go up there" meant. It taught me once again that the choice of language is important. And that computers must come with Aboriginal English dialect attachments for me.

Lovella

A couple of elderly Aboriginal sisters were telling me about some things that happened in their childhood and each kept adding essential details to what the other said. The thing that really stood out was that no story is complete until everyone has been placed in it. *Everyone* that was there has to be mentioned in the story, no matter how small their part was. I had the same thing with one of my own stories. I was reminding my cousin about something that happened when we was kids and a really good friend of mine said "I was there too! You'd better mention me in the story!" and I knew I'd *have* to or I'd be in trouble.

Caroline

On the last Friday of term I had the idea to take a few girls on holidays with me. I walked down to where I knew some of the ladies were to ask permission to take the four girls. I sat down with them and said, "You know how I'm going to Perth today – well I want to take the big girls with me". The ladies did not bat an eyelid – let alone pause for a minute in their card game as they replied in language, "Yes". I sort of sat there waiting for a bit more feedback and after about five minutes one old lady lent over, touched my leg and said, "You right", meaning that I'd already been given permission. There was no need for all the talk.

There is another related story that appears in Solid English *(Cahill, 1999:24) ...*

Patsy

The following remark was made by one of my Aboriginal students about a teacher who talked a lot: "He talks and talks and talks – he's hiding behind his words".

Rosemary

Glenys and I were talking one day about an incident in which a non-Aboriginal person took offence when Glenys had disagreed with the person's views on an important issue. When Glenys related to me exactly what she'd said to the other person, I could see that a misunderstanding had arisen because Glenys doesn't normally couch opposing opinions with hedging devices such as, "Yes, but don't you think that...." or, "No, I don't really agree because..." and because the non-Aboriginal person normally expects such hedging to "soften" the point of disagreement. Many Aboriginal people find "all the words" a bit of a nuisance, and prefer to get straight to the point. If they think you're on the wrong track they'll tell you in no uncertain terms with something like, "Nah, thas bullshit!" instead of the hedged "Oh,...I don't really think so". When you look closely at the message in these two utterances, they're actually saying the same thing but the effect on a non-Aboriginal audience would be very different.

The differences between the above two utterances are not only in the words selected. There are also pragmatic differences between the two dialects that teachers need to understand and impart to their students so they are able to develop code-switching abilities.

Tanya

A year 1 boy who had just started school asked me for a dollar when he saw me counting some petty cash with another teacher. When I said, “No I can’t give you a dollar”, and went on to explain why, he automatically swore at me. I understood that his reaction was what he was used to doing at home and that he was not really aware of the different rules for school, so I simply asked him to wait till I’d finished talking to the other teacher. At this point the boy realised that what he’d done wasn’t appropriate and burst into tears. Perhaps he understood that there was a different set of rules operating at school from home.

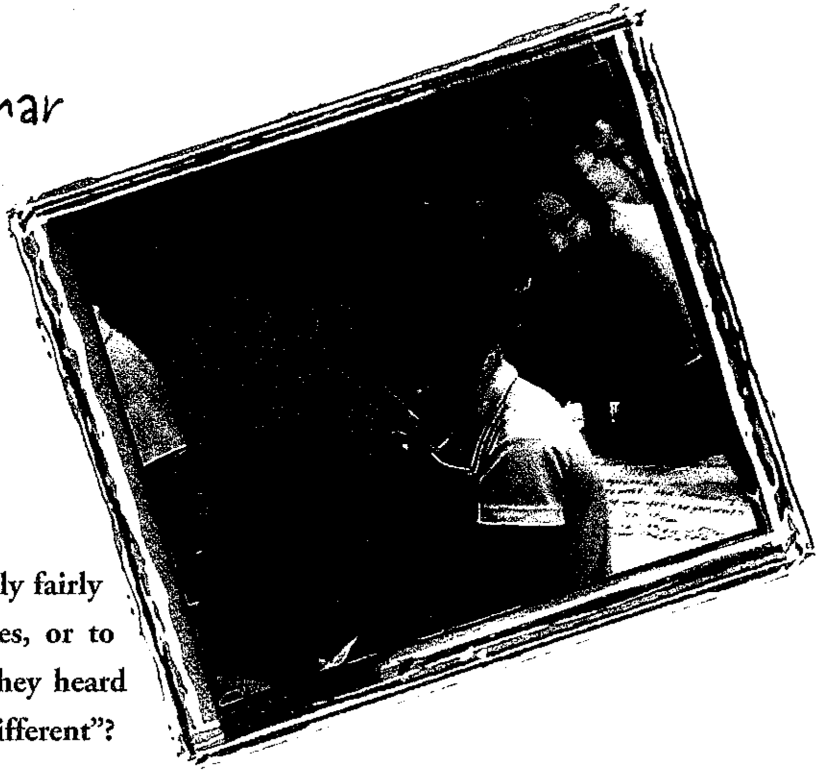
aunts
Sam
Timmy
Joey
Tina
Family
Son

Sue

Swearing is a tricky one. There are different views about swearing; the severity or importance of different words, etc...When teachers say, “We don’t swear at school”, we are giving the message that it is not acceptable at school. We need to know, however, that swearing may not carry the same associated negatives in their homes or in home talk.

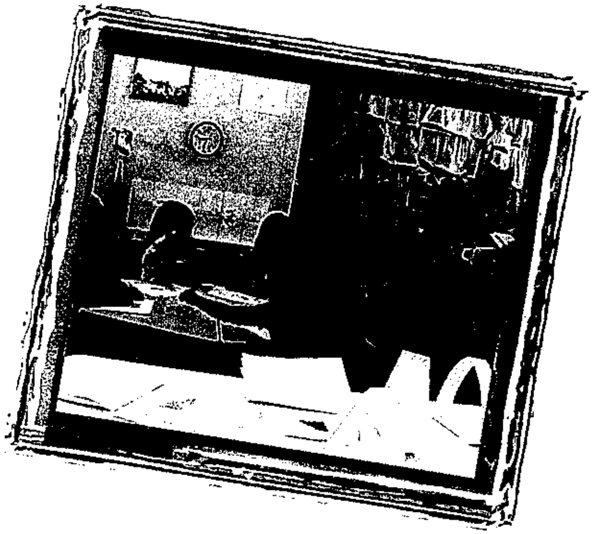
Syntax

Syntax relates to how word order and grammar influence meaning. It is where tense is marked, ownership is signalled and pronouns show whether you are talking about males or females, etc.



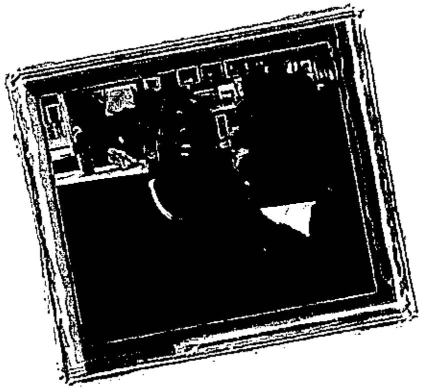
There were not a lot of yarns relating to syntax. This is probably because it is normally fairly clear cut – whether the form chosen conforms to Standard Australian English rules, or to Aboriginal English rules. The main question would be how teachers reacted when they heard application of Aboriginal English rules – did they think "wrong" or did they think "different"?

For a comprehensive account of Aboriginal English syntactic rules, see Malcolm Konigsberg in Langwij comes to School *(McRae, 1994: 30-31),* Two-Way English *(Malcolm et. al., 1999: 47-53) or* Solid English *(Cahill, 1999: 28-29).*



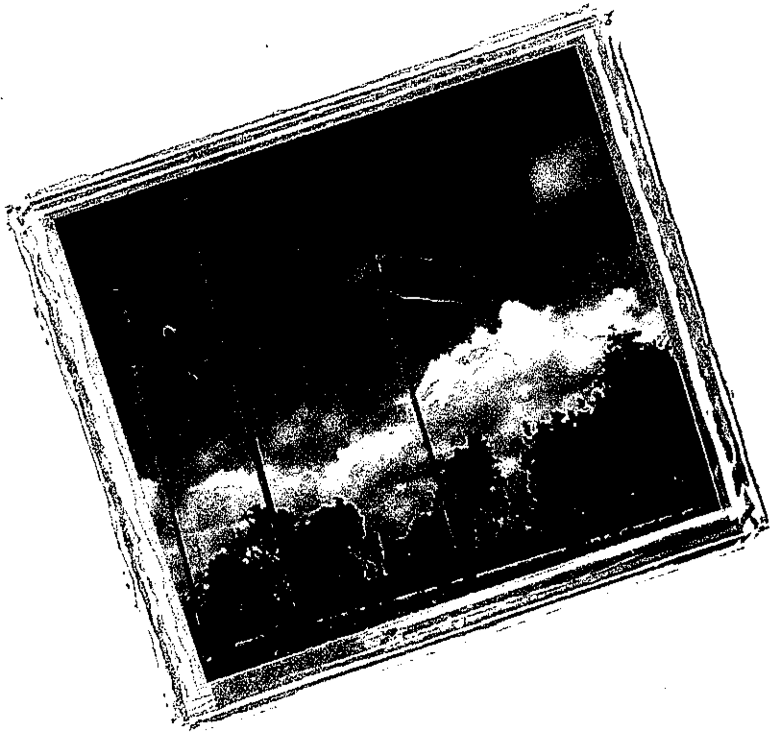
Donna

In an oral language session where kids were telling news to a group:
"What's your news, Stephen?"
"I bin goin bush."
I began asking prompting questions to extend the news-telling, "Did you? When did you go? Whereabouts?...and so on. There was no response from Stephen, and he was looking a bit confused.
Another member of the group piped up, "He ain't bin yet, Miss".
I'd completely missed the fact that Stephen had used "I bin goin ..." to mark an event that was going to happen in the future.



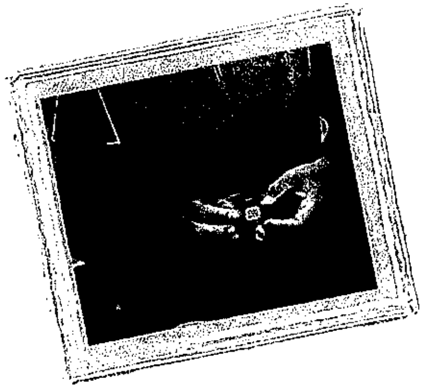
Semantics

Semantics relates to the meanings attributed to words. Given that Aboriginal English has been described as "English words with Aboriginal meanings" there is a lot of scope for misunderstandings when the same words are used by two groups to mean different things.



We ad a teacher at our school – anyway a little girl in the class was smart and always got her work finished fast. And there was a little Aboriginal boy who always had trouble, so when the little girl had finished, the teacher asked 'er to go an' 'elp the little boy. Together, they finished the work in no time. The little boy turned to 'er and said,
"Eh, you 'orse!"
The little girl didn't like bein' called a horse, so she went back to her desk, lookin' all upset.
The teacher asked her "What's the matter?"
"He called me a horse."
To the little boy, "Did you call her a horse?"
"No, Miss!"
"You can sit-out at recess for that!"
Anyway, he was sittin' in the sit-out the room when I came along. "What you doin' ere? What you in trouble for?"
He told me he didn't know, so I asked the teacher. She told me that he'd called the little girl who'd helped him a "horse". When I heard the word "horse" I knew there might be more to it, so I went back to the little boy and aksed, " What did you say?"
"I told 'er she was 'orse 'cause she helped me with my work. 'An she was real good."
I explained the mix-up to the teacher. She felt really bad and apologised to the little boy, and asked me to explain it to the little girl. I told her that by him calling her "horse" he was really telling her that she was really smart, Aboriginal way...when someone is very good at something, we tell 'em they're 'orse. Everyone else was happy in the end, but the little girl still felt uneasy 'cause she couldn't really see how being told she was "horse" (because she was still thinkin' "a horse") was a compliment.

One night camping out bush an old man was telling us a story. He spoke very little English so his story was in language. One young man was translating. The old man was very animated – clapping his hands and being very "vocal". A few seconds into the story the translator said, "Oh, one camel he bin chase him". The old man proceeded for at least another three or four minutes with the story, getting louder and louder and more and more animated. The translator then said, "Oh, that camel it still bin chase him up". We, of course, were very disappointed as we could tell that we had missed so much.



Noriko, a Japanese exchange teacher and Majella, a teaching colleague were talking one day about rice. Noriko wanted to know the English word for rice that is roughly ground, but not to a point of being rice flour. Majella explained, "Well, we don't really have a set of words for rice...we don't really do much with it – boiled rice, wild rice, brown rice, long-grain rice, but we don't do much to it. That's probably why we don't have many words for it. The Japanese do lots of things with it and need words to describe all the variations...like we do with pepper – pepper corns (not seeds or grains, and we use "corns" only for pepper in this way), cracked pepper, coarse ground pepper, black pepper, red pepper, white pepper, fine-ground pepper…"

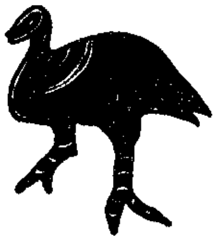
"Oh! So many words!"

This exchange illustrates the detailed understandings and nuances people learn about their mother tongue (and the *semantic fields* within), often without being aware of it. As the conversation finished, Noriko said "Thank you so much." Majella replied, "I always enjoy talking with you about this because it's interesting to learn things about my own language that I already know but am not aware of until I have to think it through".

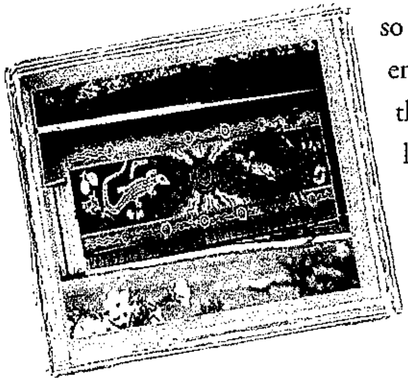
Students of all language codes can benefit from similar explorations of language and of semantic fields. Students can work in groups to debate simple issues like "When does a *twig* become a *branch?* When does *huge* become *enormous?* What's the difference between a *grin* and a *smile?* and so on. The key is to get the students to explore and value the diversity of views held within the group – not necessarily to reach consensus.

The following yarns illustrate that the vocabulary of school (as well of particular learning areas) needs to be explicitly taught and should not be assumed ...

My year 9 students were writing up about photos in the local area. One photo was of the local abattoir, and it came out that the kids didn't understand the word "abattoir". After some discussion, the term "Meat Works" came up. It was always referred to as "the Meat Works" in the town and they'd never heard of an "abattoir". It had never been used by them, so it had no relevance.



I work with mature-age Aboriginal students, and a lot of their work is done on computers. There's a constant problem with saving work, and it all goes back to differences between Aboriginal English and Standard English. When a Standard English speaking person would say “has”; my students (who speak Aboriginal English) say “‘as”. Now think of saving work on a computer. The path my students have been shown to use is “Save as”, but my students often read this prompt as “Save has” (or has saved) so they think, “Yep, already done that”, so they press the enter key and lose their work. We've lost lots of work this way.



When I first started at this school the kids would often respond to one of my comments with, “You lyin' Miss!” I would defend my comments with, “No, it is the truth”. They would all laugh and go on with whatever they were doing. Some time later I discovered that “you lyin' “ is the Aboriginal English equivalent of “you're joking”. I used to get quite upset about it until I was told what “you lyin” means.

The likelihood of miscommunication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people increases when the exchange relates to time, quantification, family or country. This is because the way these domains are understood in Aboriginal culture (and represented in Aboriginal English semantics) is different to the way they are understood in (for example) Anglo-Celtic culture.

A non-Aboriginal worker in a community wanted to take a back track to Alice Springs. He went to the community chairman to ask him how long it would take to get there that way. The chairman spoke English pretty well – he was able to have conversations beyond community issues. When asked this question the chairman said after a bit of thought, “Oh, maybe one hour”. This man came to us and was quite shocked by the chairman's answer. My partner said to this man, “Go back and ask, ‘If I leave when the sun comes up, when will I get to Alice Springs?’ “When asked again, the chairman didn't hesitate: “Oh, it'll be dark”.

Rosemary

A friend told me about her son's first day at school. The teacher must have had a policy of keeping brand-new students busy...she had already sent most of the class off for a run and, as soon as my friend had introduced herself and little Alan, the teacher bent down to Alan and said, "Go and do a lap around those buildings...off you go". After a lengthy delay in which Alan failed to reappear, my friend went to investigate. She found him around the back of the first building, sobbing his heart out.

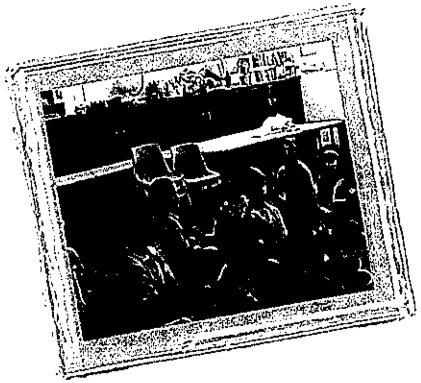
"Oh, darling, what's the matter?"

"I don't know what a lap is!"

Alan had the advantage of being a Standard Australian English speaker but he still got caught out with unfamiliar vocabulary at school. How do the little kids who speak a non-standard dialect fare?

The following anecdote shows, from another angle, how culture and semantics are linked. I'd heard this sort of story before, but didn't think that it was true until Patsy confirmed that it once happened to her ...

When I first came to Australia, I was invited to a party and I was asked to bring a plate. I thought this was a bit strange...that people would ask their guests to bring plates for a party but I didn't question it. When I arrived at the party with my plate, the person who'd invited me burst out laughing and said, "No, that's not what I meant!" and went on to explain the Australian custom to me. I felt like a fool.



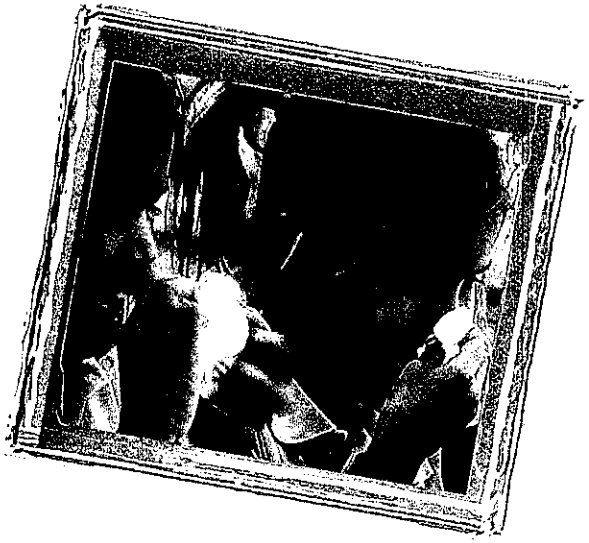
Phonology

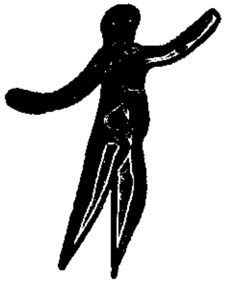
Certain sounds that separate words in Standard Australian English may not be clearly differentiated in Aboriginal English (for example: p/b, t/d, e/i/ee and ch/sh), so words like chip and sheep may sound the same to speakers of Aboriginal English.

This can be compounded by conductive hearing loss associated with middle ear infection (Otitis Media) which is especially prevalent among Aboriginal students. It is important that teachers be aware of the sounds that are likely to cause difficulties, that they have a program that attends to Otitis Media (such as that suggested in the *Do You Hear What I Hear* package [Education Department of Western Australia, 1998]) and that they are alert to situations like the following...

Kate

A teacher in one of the Kimberley communities had a boy called "Toby". One of the older men in a nearby community was heard to comment on the poor little fellow having a name like that and what were his parents thinking of, giving him that name?
It turns out that this old bloke had worked as a ringer on stations around his country and thought the name derogatory because he associated it with past bosses saying, "C'mon you dopey bastard – back to work", after siesta breaks and the like. To him, "Toby" and "Dopey" sounded exactly the same.



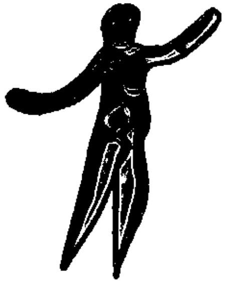


I visited a K-3 class in a remote school where all the children were vernacular speakers of Martu Wangka. The class teacher had some well-illustrated and presented charts to teach initial sounds. They had "A for apple", "B for ball", " C for car" and so on. Unfortunately the children never used the word "car". Instead, they said "modagar" (say motor car quickly and you'll get the gist). This being the case, a chart illustrating "M for modagar" may have been more appropriate. Teachers need to ensure that the tools they use for teaching concepts are apt and don't present the learners with added levels of interpreting, decoding, etc.

Encouraging my 16-year-old Aboriginal boy to fill in a withdrawal slip for the bank was hard enough. He was shame but I said he needed to learn. Imagine the poor boy's embarrassment when he marked on the amount "sixty dollies". At 16, a tough Nyungar going to the counter wondered why the teller was laughing. I didn't tell him his mistake. I knew it would cause embarrassment. But this is a good example of Aboriginal English – for 16 years he had been calling dollars "dollies" and I'd never noticed.

When I was introducing 'Hh' to my year 1 class this year, I told them that 'Hh' usually made a 'h' sound in Standard Australian English. One of my students saw the light straight away: "Oh! Like happle – happle starts with 'h'!"
In Aboriginal English, the 'h' sound is often used in front of vowels for words where there is no 'h' in Standard Australian English and vice versa. In this instance I didn't "correct" the child but we talked about the differences between words in Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English and I wrote a few of them on the board. A lot of my students can now hear differences between the way they say a word and the way I say it and they can pick which words start with an 'Hh' (in Standard Australian English).

Poppa came to the door of my pre-primary centre to give me a message to pass on to his granddaughter. He gave me the message in heavy Aboriginal English. I was having real difficulty understanding. I thought he was telling me, "I'm going down to the bridge". After calling in the Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO) he repeated the message. "No worries," the AIEO told him, "I'll tell them there's a feed in the fridge!"



I was in a classroom one day with some kids as they worked their way through some worksheets. They didn't really want to do the work, and were feeling a bit narky. After a while, one of the kids came along and said, "I done this maths shit and this spelling shit...what other shit I 'ave to do?". It could have sounded like this kid was having a go, but his teacher picked up what was going on. "Listen to that...that's his Aboriginal English way of saying 'sheet'". Some teachers who work with Aboriginal kids pick up on these things. If this teacher hadn't understood what the boy was saying, he would have got into trouble for nothing – and wouldn't have known what it was for.